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ROBERT J. WALKER
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ROBERT J. WALKER IMPERIALIST



FHAT the remains of one of the ablest of American secretaries of the treasury, of a politician whose exploits were discussed all around the world, of a maker of presidents and a "Savior of the Union," should rest nearly forty years in an unmarked grave in an obscure cemetery is one of the contrasts of fortune which might give concern even to the boldest wooers of fame. But to have played such a rôle and then have one's name written one way on one's tombstone and another on the pages of history is almost as bad as to be forgotten altogether. Such was, however, the fate of Robert James Walker,¹ secretary of the treasury under James K.

¹The Library of Congress gives the name on its catalogue as Robert James Walker; Appleton's Encyclopedia prints it Robert John Walker; and on the tombstone in Oak Hill cemetery, Washington, it is written Robert John Walker.

Polk, author of the best tariff law known to our statute books,¹ and the greatest imperialist who ever violated the most solemn of all American declarations. Such a post-mortem might suggest a very tame and prosaic biography. Not so in the case of Walker, whose life was as crowded with event and vicissitude as ever the tale of a novelist. Yet neither story-teller nor sober historian ever stumbled upon the subject, and the records themselves have all but perished.

Born of good parentage in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, on July 23, 1801, he grew up in the midst of the democratic up-country which saw in Thomas Jefferson the ideal of American life. Young Walker was sent at an early age to the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated in July, 1819, at the head of his class. He next appears as a surveyor for a land company in the northwest corner of the state, but in this raw region his principal interest was the study of law, for in three years he was ready to begin the practice of that profession; and he located in Pittsburgh in 1822.²

When at college he seems to have made the acquaintance of Mary Bache, the granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, and they

¹ Compare Taussig, F. W., *The Tariff History of the United States*, 109-154.

² Brown, G. W., *Reminiscences of Gov. R. J. Walker*, Rockford, Ill., 1902, pp. 24-25.

were married soon after he settled in the busy little city on the Ohio. Thus he became a member of the powerful Bache and Dallas families so well known to the country in the years just preceding the civil war. His father was then a judge of the state supreme court; his wife's father had been postmaster-general during the Revolution, and his brother-in-law, George M. Dallas, was already winning fame as assistant United States district attorney for eastern Pennsylvania.

The Dallas influence in Pennsylvania had already been given to the cause of Andrew Jackson and young Walker made an address before an enthusiastic gathering in Pittsburgh in the autumn of 1823, urging upon the voters of the state the wisdom of supporting the doughty warrior for President the next year. When the Republican state convention met at Harrisburg the following spring the speech of the "little lawyer" from Pittsburgh was made the formal address of the party to the people of the country.¹ It was a lucky stroke, for to have been an "original Jackson man" soon came to be an open sesame for the highest honors in the land.

Jackson did not win in 1824, but most people in Pittsburgh thought he ought to have won and that Henry Clay and John

¹ *Natchez Statesman and Gazette*, July 3, 1828.

Quincy Adams had, with sinister purpose, conspired to deprive him of his right to the high office to which he had aspired. Two years later Robert Walker followed his brother Duncan to the then far-off Natchez on the lower Mississippi, where he became a member of the law firm of "Walker and Walker."¹ The older brother died three years later and Robert came into a practice of great value and importance. His friends and associates were Joseph Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis, John A. Quitman, and others, soon to win national reputations as leaders and spokesmen of the growing Southwest.

There was no more interesting or lively community in the United States than the Mississippi of 1830. With a population of 136,000, nearly half of whom were slaves, millions of acres of rich lands ready for occupation, and the stimulus of sudden wealth promised by the ever-increasing demand for cotton, it was but natural that "times" should be "flush" and that men should be reckless. Fortunes were won in a few years and great plantations speedily took the places of canebrakes and stagnant swamps. Joseph Davis had gone to Natchez a poor man; he was now a great lawyer and a master of many slaves. James C. Wilkins, of Pennsylvania, had begun with

¹ *Natchez Statesman and Gazette*, January 31, 1828.

little capital; he was now the head of a bank which controlled the currency of the whole state. Money-making was a mania and everybody had a hand in speculations, large or small. To resist this régime or to refuse to endorse for a friend was frequently the occasion for a duel. "A Mr.— brought a letter of introduction from a friend. I endorsed his bill for one thousand dollars and had it discounted for him. It came back protested. Do you know where he is or anything about him?" Another comment on these "flush times" runs: "I should like to get a contract for building a section of the Mississippi railroad. I owe about \$250,000. But I am planting fifteen hundred acres in cotton and I own three large plantations well stocked with negroes. The paper now due I could discharge with my cotton crop; but by that time another instalment falls due, so I must draw on next year's crop or go to work on the railroad. If I could only arrange with your bank to draw in anticipation of my work, you might pay my debts, supply provisions and so forth, and a few thousand dollars for pocket money and a trip to the springs, and I will forthwith put two hundred able-bodied negroes on the road"—this from a man who three years before had scarce owned a penny's worth!

But the greatest subject of exploitation

was the Indian, who still owned vast areas of lands in the West. From Illinois to Louisiana the hardy pioneers, whose characters we are so prone to idealize to-day, were ruthlessly despoiling, without pretense of legal right, the helpless natives. The very basis of Jackson's power was his free license to the westerners to work their wills upon these wards of the nation. Nowhere was this spirit more rampant than in Mississippi, where some fifteen thousand square miles of land was still in the hands of the Indians and hotly coveted by cotton planters and small farmers alike. In February, 1831, the treaty of Dancing Rabbit gave the Mississippians conditional possession of all this land. Public land sales were announced in 1833 only a short forty days before the auctioneer was to begin his work. The Indians, who were still trying to save themselves by showing the illegality of the treaty, were in the greatest distress; and the army of squatters already on the public domain were hardly less disturbed by this sudden turn of things. Only the land agents and their friends who had prepared this stroke were happy.

Into this situation Walker plunged with an abandon suggestive of his future career. He organized some two hundred of the prospective purchasers into an association of which he became principal spokesman and

beneficiary. These gentlemen, men of the first consequence in Mississippi and the neighboring states, Government officials, directors of banks, and judges of the courts, entered into an agreement whereby they were not to bid against each other at any of the sales of public lands. Walker and his appointees were to manage the bidding and afterwards apportion the proceeds. They made arrangements with squatters and small farmers to procure for them their little tracts on condition that they would not bid against the association. The charge for this service was a dollar an acre above the Government minimum. And this scheme of defrauding the country was so popular that Walker was given a public dinner by the farmers and squatters at the conclusion of the sales at Choccoma.¹

The plan of the association was carried out everywhere, the Federal land officers lending their aid and receiving their reward; and Walker and his friends thus came into possession of great tracts of land which were easily sold at prices ranging from two to twenty dollars per acre. Many of the fortunes of the lower South were the result of this campaign against the treasury of the United States; but it might be regarded as ungracious, even at this late day, to publish

¹ *American State Papers, Public Lands*, VII, 448-64; also VIII, 711-788.

a list of the names of the men who at that time made no denial of their part in the transaction.¹

The scandal of the land sales of October, 1833, was so great that Senator Poindexter, one of the foremost public men of the time, succeeded in getting an investigation of the subject, and a report was made to the senate in the summer of 1834, which showed something of the character of Walker's work in this his first important undertaking. Senators from Tennessee, Alabama, and Louisiana resisted Poindexter's efforts to give the widest publicity to the report, and especially his proposition to punish the guilty parties. Nothing was done except to print the report, which appeared in many newspapers of the time without any severe criticism of the transaction. Henry Clay and Daniel Webster supported the investigation, while others said that the practice of defrauding the Government had gone so far and involved so many eminent characters that it was well-nigh impossible to punish anyone.²

Poindexter had raised a dangerous issue in Mississippi and his defeat was demanded at the coming election. Now, the distin-

¹See Riley, F. L., *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, VIII, 345-395, for story of the Choctaw land frauds which grew out of these operations.

²*Register of Debates in Congress*, X, pt. 1, 43; *Ibid.*, 754-755, 812-14.

guished senator was none too strong with the people at best ; his attack upon the land thieves, numerous as they were, only added to his troubles. Besides, he had broken with Jackson, who had charged him with having instigated the recent attack upon his life. From an ardent supporter in 1828 he became an opponent when Calhoun had been driven out of the Presidential counsels in the spring of 1831. In the Jackson-Clay campaign of the next year Poindexter had been the most ardent Clay and bank champion. This completed the Presidential condemnation, and the Mississippi senator was henceforth a marked man. Poindexter had long been the most ardent of the southern nationalists ; he now became an extreme state's rights advocate and follower of Calhoun.¹

Walker, who now began a two-years' campaign against his former friend, Poindexter, had already won his spurs in Mississippi politics. His championship of Jackson had been of the greatest importance in 1828, and in the fight in the lower South against Nullification he was an acknowledged leader ; it was his influence which in large measure caused the defeat of the Calhoun party in the Mississippi legislature in the winter of 1833. At the time he organized his raid on the public lands he was proclaiming his

¹Rowland, Dunbar, *Encyclopedia of Mississippi*, "Poindexter."

everlasting devotion to the Union. But the greatest of his political undertakings to date was begun in 1834, when he served notice on Poindexter that he would contest with him the right to represent Mississippi in the United States senate. For two years the battle waged. Every device known to American politics was resorted to. Poindexter had ceased to represent the people of his state, it was charged; he had slandered some of the best names in the Southwest; he had tried to assassinate the President of the United States.

Henry Clay lent his influence to this bitter enemy of Jackson; Sergeant Prentiss rose to fame in the defense of Poindexter; and the budding Whig party of that region identified its fortunes with those of the great senator. But the Jackson administration favored Walker; the small farmers were enthusiastic in his behalf; speculators were even more closely identified with his cause; and in order to make a strong local appeal to the eastern section of the state he purchased a plantation in Madison county and took up his residence there. He pleased the squatter element by urging as a part of his policy the free homestead idea, which became law only under Lincoln thirty years later; he attracted the religious element by adopting the revivalist methods of Lorenzo Dow, the famous itinerant evangelist. The

Gwins helped him finance his campaign, and Henry S. Foote, later of "hangman" fame in the United States senate, supplied a billingsgate oratory which equalled, if it did not surpass, that of Poindexter himself. The outcome was a decided victory for Walker, though the election in the legislature¹ became at once the subject of an investigation, which, however, only led to a "whitewash."

Walker was now thirty-six years old and a member of the United States senate. In appearance he was anything but prepossessing; he resembled, somewhat, Alexander Stephens, the homeliest man who ever sat in congress; he was thin, angular, and a dyspeptic who was frequently unable to be at his post of duty; but he was withal a man of towering ambition, a consummate intriguer and as versatile in all the arts of the politician as if he had been "bred to the trade." "The Wizard of Mississippi" he was called, and the title was apt; he was the first of modern bosses. And he gave the public an inkling of his personal pretensions when he reminded the senate that he had taken his seat on the anniversary of Washington's birth.²

Clay did not relish the presence or the

¹ *The Mississippian*, Jan. 31, 1836; and for the campaign see *ibid.*, Oct. 9, 1830, Dec. 18, 1835, and Jan. 31, 1836.

² *Register of Debates in Congress*, Vol. 12, part 1, 1175-76.

pretensions of the new member, and he promptly reminded Walker of the disastrous effect of any comparison of himself with the "Father of his Country." This was but the beginning of the hazing which leading senators gave the ambitious newcomer. But treatment of this kind did not disturb the man who had completely captivated the people of his state and who was presently to become the spokesman of Andrew Jackson in the "most august legislative body in the world." The new member stood triumphantly in the place of the man who had only a short while before denounced him before the country, and he confronted Henry Clay, who had advised criminal prosecutions against him and his friends. And Walker was not the man to conceal his delight at the embarrassment of his foes.¹

Until Walker appeared in the senate Thomas H. Benton had been the acknowledged mouthpiece of the West in that body; but the young senator at once took place as a western member whose views must count. Benton was the advocate of very liberal land laws; Walker proposed the free homestead policy. Benton had long been urging the quiet purchase of Texas; Walker raised the cry of the immediate "reannexation" of Texas without consulting the wishes of any

¹ *Register of Debates in Congress*, Vol. 12, part 1, 1029, 1172-73.

other country. Within a year the little man from Mississippi had superseded Benton as the distinctly western senator, and he took the almost insufferable position of ignoring Clay and Webster. Calhoun he patronized and labored with in the hope that that famous statesman might rise to the highest level of national statesmanship. The South, more sensitive now than ever on the subject of slavery, he embraced in a way that took no denial, for, on behalf of "our peculiar institution," he declared himself ready at any time to go to war with a world in arms, confident that the South would emerge triumphant.¹ Within the two years, for which time he had been elected, he won a place among the foremost Democratic senators, representing all that the West demanded and distancing Calhoun in his readiness to fight for southern rights. In Mississippi his meteoric rise attracted universal applause, and when the time came for a second election, delegations of prominent men, many of whom had formerly opposed him, visited him and urged him to do what he had intended to do from the first,— "stand again" for the senate. "Nothing succeeds like success" is a favorite American adage, and so it proved in Walker's case. He was re-elected by an almost unanimous vote.

¹ *Register of Debates in Congress*, March 2, 1836.

At the head of his party in Mississippi and a powerful leader in national affairs, he gave his counsel to and assumed responsibility for the wildest financial manipulations ever espoused by an American commonwealth. Under Walker's leadership Mississippi borrowed more than ten million dollars from Nicholas Biddle and his clients on state credit and then loaned the money to planters and others in need of funds on the uncertain security of lands and slaves. Walker, himself, is said to have borrowed huge sums and even to have taken, without security, a portion of the sinking fund of the state banks, whose directors were the medium of all these transactions.¹ Nobody seems to have thought that a debt of ten millions was any burden to a population of less than four hundred thousand, including slaves.

When the day of reckoning came Walker and his party escaped the natural result by inducing the legislature to repudiate practically the whole debt and on the pretext that Nicholas Biddle had negotiated with the agents of the state a loan which was contrary to the mandates of the Mississippi constitution! Before 1844 the slate was clean and Walker gave himself no concern about the transaction, while it was quite generally regarded as a fine stroke to have

¹ 6 Howard's *Mississippi Reports*, 143.

outwitted the President of the "monster bank" whom most followers of Jackson felt to be legitimate prey for honest Democrats. Walker suffered, however, in his personal fortunes, and he was brought to the humiliating necessity of promising his creditor, Martin Van Buren, a lien on his meagre salary as senator.¹

He was, therefore, almost a penniless man when he was a most powerful senator, intimate with the President, and an adviser in all that came before the Van Buren administration. The Whig "landslide" of 1840 did not seriously affect his fortunes, for upon the death of Harrison he was speedily restored to the position of confidential friend of President Tyler. He claims, I think with justice, a large share in the shaping of Tyler's financial policy and in first directing the attention of the Government to the importance of establishing diplomatic relations with China and Japan.

But the greatest work of Walker before the civil war was that of the year 1844, when he became the author of the whole national program. In the autumn of 1843 some Kentucky Democrats, at a meeting in Carroll county, nominated the "Honorable Robert J. Walker" vice-president and sent him a letter asking him for an expres-

¹ *Van Buren Manuscripts*, letter of Walker, dated Feb. 8, 1841.

sion of his views on the Texas question. Walker replied to this request in a pamphlet of some forty pages, in which he showed how "all Texas and all Oregon" had long been the property of the United States and that it was the duty of the Democratic party to reassert the rights of the country to these vast possessions, regardless of what England might have to say. He gave out his reply on the auspicious 8th of January, then celebrated everywhere as Jackson day, and it speedily passed through several editions. Few pamphlets have stirred up more discussion or had a more far-reaching effect. The main idea, that the United States should assume a thoroughly imperialistic tone and take what was wanted at the risk of war with England, was supported by the most specious reasoning. When the Democratic convention met in Baltimore, in the following May, Walker was as much the master of the majority of the delegates as was Mr. Bryan in a similar body in 1912.¹

Of course the way had been long preparing for the adoption, by one of the great parties, of the Walker policy. Tyler and Calhoun had committed the Government to this program, while Van Buren had sought to moderate and control the enthusiastic im-

¹ *Van Buren Manuscripts*, Library of Congress; letter of J. L. O'Sullivan to Van Buren from the Convention Hall, May 27, 1844; *National Intelligencer*, May 28, 1844.

1. perialists. But Walker, regardless of his
2. close and friendly relations with Van Buren,
3. brushed aside that powerful leader, wrote
4. his pamphlet into the platform, and then
5. brought about the nomination of his favorite,
6. James K. Polk, for President, and his brother-
7. in-law, George M. Dallas, for Vice-President.
8. Every one acknowledged the power of the
9. little senator, and in the national campaign
which ensued he was again the astute and
resourceful manager he had been in his
great fight against Poindexter in Missis-
sippi.¹ The opposing candidate was Henry
Clay, who drew to himself the conservative
forces of the country and for whom the
greatest exertions were made, but without
avail. Walker was only less successful than
he had been in his earlier undertakings, and
it was exultantly said that "this is the last
of Clay," which proved to be the fact. The
election of Polk was but the outcome of the
union of South and West against New Eng-
land; it foreshadowed a hasty and resolute
imperialism in accordance with western and
southern purposes.²

Having brought about a revolution in pol-

¹ *National Intelligencer*, Oct. 3 and 29, 1844, shows that Walker published and circulated a pamphlet, "The South in Danger," in two editions one for the South, the other for the North.

² See the author's study of "The West and the War with Mexico" in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, July, 1912, pp. 159-172.

itics it was but natural that Walker should seek to direct the course of events. The president-elect invited him to become attorney-general. Walker refused the honor and asked for what he considered the first position in the cabinet, that of secretary of the treasury. Polk could not or dared not refuse; and the man who had completely bankrupted himself and his state and had brought dishonor upon all who had been allied with him in financial matters became head of the national treasury, and it must be said in his honor that he has ever since been regarded as one of the greatest secretaries of the treasury we have ever had.

But the primary business of a cabinet officer is to guide the policy of the country, not to watch the subordinates in his department. Walker so regarded his task, and he began very early to urge upon the President the necessity of annexing all Mexico, not merely Texas; while his party friends and intimates in the Northwest, like Senator Breese of Illinois, insisted that all Canada must likewise be "benevolently assimilated." Polk resisted, but not with entire success, as the Mexican cessions of 1848 attest, and the country was thoroughly infatuated with the expansionist mania, if one may believe the contemporary newspapers and the speeches of members of congress. As the war with Mexico progressed

and Europe became hopelessly involved in the widespread revolutions of 1848, Walker and his friends insisted that the time had come for the United States to realize that "high destiny" which Providence had marked out for her,—namely, to "spread her free institutions" over the whole of the North American continent.¹

The influence of the West and South was made to bear upon congress until it was about to yield to the demand for seizing all Mexico; Walker and Buchanan pressed the President in almost daily cabinet meetings. Polk recalled Trist, the minister to Mexico, in order to change his policy. Trist refused, under advice of General Scott, to heed the command of his Government—conduct unprecedented in all our diplomatic history—and negotiated a treaty which was hastened to Washington in February, 1848. When this arrived, Polk and his advisers were angry, but helpless. The treaty guaranteed all the concessions that had been demanded. That Europe could not interfere was now the opinion of all, especially of Cass and the senate leaders; and to make the course of aggrandizement easier, an agent of Yucatan was on the ground begging the President to annex that region to the United States.

Under these circumstances Walker ex-

¹Quaife, M. M., *Diary of James K. Polk*, III, 28.

pected to win and to see all Mexico brought under the flag of his country. But the Trist treaty could not be thrown into the waste basket, as Walker and Buchanan urged. It was sent to the senate, where it was to be accepted; but a few days later the cabinet recommended that the United States army and navy take formal possession of Yucatan, knowing that this would undo all that had been agreed to in the treaty, and bring at least the dismemberment of Mexico. Cass, Hannegan of Indiana, and Douglas of Illinois, all urged this step, and it was only by a sudden move of Mexico which satisfied Yucatan, that we escaped the extreme results of the war upon our southern neighbor—the expansion of our southern boundary to Central America, in the year 1848.

As secretary of the treasury Walker carried into effect the independent treasury scheme, which is practically identical with our present system of subtreasuries; and his revenue reform bill, which has been called the best of American tariffs, was enacted in 1846, and it remained in force, with only slight modification in 1857, until the exigencies of a great war compelled a change of system. It filled the national coffers as they had never before been filled, so that the financing of the war with Mexico was a comparatively easy matter. Walker's

administration of the treasury of the United States was made the subject of encomium in the British parliament by no less an authority than Sir Robert Peel. That he was scrupulously clean-handed has never been denied, though he allowed August Belmont, the representative of the Rothschilds in New York, and William W. Corcoran, the Washington capitalist and public benefactor, to take liberties with the public funds which were the subject of anxious inquiry on the part of the President, who was, however, usually ignored in matters of "high finance."¹ Walker's old friends, the Mississippi land speculators, were also allowed to collect some very bad claims, which caused Polk to make ugly entries in his diary,² but I have been unable to find any evidence of a more serious protest. What is a President to do when he has a most imperious secretary of the treasury, who at the same time dominates and controls the leaders of his party in congress? A confidential diary is about the only recourse.

A sad mistake of Walker during these days of power was the placing of Jefferson Davis in nomination for a seat in congress. Davis was young, able, and he proved to be popular in Mississippi beyond all calculation. Resigning his seat in the house of

¹ Quaife, *Diary of James K. Polk*, III, 164-167.

² *Ibid.*, II, 128, 129.

representatives he hastened off to the war in the autumn of 1846, and in the spring of 1847 he was the hero of the battle of Buena Vista and was heralded throughout the nation as next to Taylor, the greatest general of the day. When Davis returned to Mississippi he was sent to the United States senate by the unanimous vote of the legislature. A year later, when the Whigs came into power not to undo the work of the Polk administration but to approve it, Walker was out of office and Davis was the great man in Mississippi. The retiring secretary saw no better outlook than to open a law office in Washington City.¹

The man who had made Polk and guided the country in its first era of conquest now took up the career of a lobbyist and a lawyer practicing before the departments he had so recently dominated. Such are the extremes of fortune of the American leader. He never returned to the planter life of the lower South with its lordly ways; and, if we may believe a letter now in the Van Buren manuscripts, he repented of some of his former enthusiasm for slavery and its influence in public affairs.² He might well have added some regret for the unscrupulous haste with

¹ *The Free Trader*, a Mississippi newspaper of much influence, March 17, 1849.

² *Van Buren Manuscripts*, letter of Frank P. Blair June 10, 1849.

which he had overthrown his friend Van Buren in the Baltimore convention.

From 1849 to 1857 the "Wizard of Mississippi" led the monotonous life of his somewhat dubious calling in Washington, hoping all the while to find a way back to the exciting business of public leadership. Twice only in this period, so far as I have been able to discover, did he find himself a subject for headlines in the newspapers: once when he went to England and cleverly sold that bond-loving people about a million dollars' worth of railroad securities, enticing his quarry by buying, with the proceeds of his operations, some thousands of tons of railroad iron which he resold in New York for good American money;¹ and a second time, when he was asked by his erstwhile friend, Jefferson Davis, to go to China as commissioner of the United States. Davis was now the power behind the Pierce administration, as Walker had been behind that of Polk. Somehow the appointment was not made, Walker giving out as the reason the failure of the Government to provide him with a national ship for his transportation.² Just at the close of these eight years of private life he accepted a contingent fee from

¹ Letcher, John, a pamphlet in the library of the University of Chicago.

² Brief sketch of his own career by Walker himself, in *National Intelligencer*, Nov. 12, 1869.

a California mining company which yielded in a short time a harvest of some hundreds of thousands of dollars.¹

If he ever repented fully his devotion to the Democratic party of that day he did not make it known to the leaders, for in the campaign of James Buchanan, whose nomination was manipulated by Henry A. Wise, John Slidell, and August Belmont, he was a most effective stump speaker and apologist of slavery. As evidence of the appreciation of the new President he was tendered appointment to the most critical post in the country, that of governor of Kansas, "bleeding Kansas." The President made a personal matter of this appointment and urged acceptance in a way most flattering to Walker. This time the tender was received, and important papers of the country hailed the former Democratic leader as a statesman who would solve the problem of slavery in the territories. *Harper's Weekly*, already playing the rôle of political prophet, declared that Walker would return from Kansas successful and a candidate for the presidency, which high position the country could scarcely deny him.²

The new governor of Kansas made a point of visiting Chicago on his way to his post and while in this city he was in confer-

¹ Claiborne, J. F. L., *History of Mississippi*, 422.

² *Harper's Weekly*, April 11, 1857.

ence with Senator Douglas, the one man whom Buchanan feared, and who had been cast off by the southern masters of the convention which nominated him. It is possible, however, that the President, at the beginning of his administration, was in agreement with Douglas that an honest referendum of the slavery problem to the actual settlers in Kansas would bring a final and satisfactory solution. If so, Walker was only acting in good faith when he made a confidant of the man who had most reason to distrust those who had come into power. At any rate the new governor went to his difficult task in full harmony with the author of the Kansas-Nebraska bill and an avowed candidate for the nomination of his party in 1860.¹

Walker's inaugural greatly pleased the moderate men in the warlike territory, and it became clear that he was endeavoring to carry out the liberal instructions which the cabinet had given him. But it is also clear from the evidence that we have that he intended to return to Washington the following year a United States senator.² He asked this honor, it seems, of each of the parties to the conflict; and I think we are justified in believing that the southern ele-

¹ *Covode Report*, 105-6.

² Brown, G. W., *Reminiscences of Robert J. Walker*, 84-90.

ment was warned against this move, while the free state party promised him the coveted honor. His decision as to voting in elections about to be held was in favor of the free state men, though this was not inconsistent with the known wishes of the administration when he received his appointment. From the day that Walker's position became known as an actual fact the southern men in Kansas and Missouri made relentless war upon him, while to the opposing party he became a hero. The Le-compton constitution was naturally opposed by Governor Walker, and in the autumn, convinced that the President had changed his ground, he returned to Washington to insist upon his point. The way to the capital led Walker to Chicago once again. And a strange meeting took place in this city that October, if we may believe a contemporary witness. Greeley, Seward, Weed, and Douglas held a friendly conference here and decided upon the line of procedure for the next congress. Walker, I am convinced, was also at the meeting, though this is not as yet susceptible of proof.¹

After this conference the great men of the East journeyed homeward; Walker went to Washington to await events, while Douglas came on a little later, big with the foreknowledge of the coming conflict. The

¹Newton, Jos. F., *Lincoln and Herndon*, 1912, p. 215.

latter visited the President for the first time since the inauguration to demand his repudiation of the Lecompton constitution. The demand was indignantly refused and Douglas fired the opening gun of the campaign of 1860 in the senate on December 9, 1857. Walker resigned a week later ; while Greeley, Weed, and Seward began the manœuvres in the press of the East which would have resulted in the effacement of Lincoln, a dangerous man to Seward,¹ and in the re-election of Douglas to the senate. What Walker was to receive I am unable to say, but he hoped for the vice-presidency and he had good reason to expect nomination for the office.

Walker was again a stranded politician. The only effect of the sojourn in Kansas had been the casting of a bomb into the ranks of the powerful and well-disciplined Democracy, which made of it two bitter factions, each seeking the overthrow of the other, and which also opened the way to the White House for the young and more deserving Republican party. Walker did not take an active part in the conflict of 1860, though he was known to be a supporter of the "Little Giant." Davis and the powerful group of southerners who controlled Buchanan spurned him as a traitor to their camp.

¹Though this was not recognized at the time.

When, in the early months of 1861, war became inevitable, Walker, like Douglas, gave all his influence to the Lincoln administration, and in 1862 he was sent to Europe as special financial agent of the Federal Government, bearing a letter of credence from President Lincoln. In London, where he set up his headquarters, he assumed a dignity comparable only to that of the Austrian ambassador.¹ Charles Francis Adams he patronized openly and irritated beyond endurance.² His mission was, however, of the gravest importance. The Confederacy was then borrowing money both in England and France without difficulty, while the finances of the United States showed a weakness and derangement which augured the success of their enemy. England and France treated the representatives of the Lincoln administration with ill-concealed hostility. The purpose of Walker's appointment was to break down the credit of the South and at the same time to sell the bonds of the United States.

"All is fair in love and war" runs an old adage, and Walker acted without scruple upon this principle. He began by showing conclusively that Jefferson Davis, not himself, had been responsible for the whole-

¹ Claiborne, *History of Mississippi*, 422.

² Walker's London Letters—A pamphlet published under the title, *American Slavery and Finance*, pp. 1-5.

sale repudiation of the Mississippi bonds in the early forties.¹ Davis had risen to prominence in his state, fighting the repudiating movement which Walker had actually counseled. But what gave Walker a great advantage was the fact that many people in England had lost their money by the conduct of Mississippi and that Davis, laboring under the false view of the politician in such things, had defended and justified in the United States senate an act of his state which he had at the time condemned.² No matter; financiers in England and elsewhere believed the plausible story. Walker printed at government expense thousands of copies of his pamphlets. They were translated into German and French and circulated on the continent. The leading newspapers, like the *London Times*, "carried" Walker's articles on the Confederate securities, and at the same time, or during the year 1863, he published the most glowing account of the soundness of the Federal finances and of the resources of the North on which her securities were based.³

Whether we credit the speedy change of conditions in Europe to Walker or not, it must be allowed that his work was of the

¹Walker, *American Slavery and Finance*, the third London letter, pages 1 to 5.

²Dodd, William E., *Life of Jefferson Davis*, 60-61.

³*Washington Daily Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1863.

greatest importance, for in the shortest space of time Confederate bonds lost all value in London and Paris, while Walker himself sold two hundred and fifty millions' worth of United States "five-twenties," remitting the proceeds to the treasury in gold at the beginning, I believe, of the year 1864.

The Confederates always attributed the failure of their cause in large measure to the breakdown of their credit in Europe, and it seems not at all unreasonable to assume that our little "Wizard of Mississippi" was the most important individual influence in bringing about that result. I, for one, am tempted to say that his work was as decisive in bringing the Confederacy to its knees in that sad winter of 1863-64 as that of the general who commanded at Gettysburg,¹ for, as is well known, Secretary Chase was at the very point several times of urging the recognition of the South because he could not find the money necessary to keep up the gigantic struggle.

It is the rule in politics to use human vessels until they cease to be of value. Such was the case with Walker. After spending his second fortune in "riotous living" for his country abroad, he returned

¹The Washington *Daily Chronicle*, inspired by Secretary Chase, said, Sept. 11, 1863: "Few men in public or private station have rendered greater service to the country."

to Washington to be half, if not wholly, spurned by his government. The South regarded him as a traitor; and now the North, whom he served with a zeal which allowed of no defeat, seemed to be ashamed of him. He took up his work of lobbyist again and more than once he had the pleasure of seeing something of the "seamy" inside of things at the capital.

As Professor Dunning, of Columbia University, has recently shown,¹ Walker's services proved very useful, both to his own government and to that of Russia, in the spring of 1868, when the house of representatives refused to make an appropriation to pay for Alaska. Secretary Seward and De Stoeckl, minister of the Czar's government in Washington, were in distress. De Stoeckl engaged John W. Forney, editor of the *Washington Chronicle*, the leading paper at the capital, to advocate the immediate payment of the money called for in the treaty, already ratified by the senate. The minister paid Forney \$30,000 for his services. He then employed Walker, for a consideration of \$26,000 in gold, to "engineer" the desired measure through the recalcitrant house. The able ex-senator plied the arts known to be effective with many statesmen and with the aid of the resources at his command he persuaded the congress, which was aflame with

¹*American Political Science Quarterly*, October, 1912.

indignation at President Johnson for an alleged understanding with the defeated southerners, to vote the appropriation; \$200,000 were spent by the two governments to secure the necessary act of congress, and Secretary Seward is on record as saying that the price of votes ran as high as \$10,000.¹ Again, it might be regarded as invidious in the student to read the list of the famous names implicated in this affair.

But it does seem to me, as I read the evidence, that it was a mean thing in Seward and De Stoeckl not to tell Walker whom they had bribed. He was, therefore, put into the embarrassing attitude of soliciting the price of dishonor from his superiors in the business even when this was unnecessary. For example, Walker, observing to De Stoeckl how great was the service of his friend, Forney, in the editorials of his paper, asked for a substantial reward. Three thousand dollars were handed him for the editor, and he was instructed to say in paying it that the Czar's government highly appreciated the services of the great newspaper. Walker innocently urged the acceptance of the paltry sum upon his friend, who declared in reply that his high position and unsullied integrity would not allow of

¹Dunning has found a memorandum of this in a paper in the handwriting of President Johnson, in *Johnson Manuscripts*, Library of Congress.

such an act. Walker went to his grave thinking that there was at least one honest man in Washington.

Our hero closed his career as he had begun it—true to his extreme nationalist ideals and unscrupulous imperialism. In the spring of 1869, when Charles Sumner stirred the country to the highest pitch of excitement and anger against Great Britain by his speech in the senate demanding the cession of all Canada as indemnity for the injury done American shipping during the war by southern cruisers, Walker wrote articles for the press arguing that Canada was only a “selvedge of the United States” and urging the people of the Dominion to revolt and throw off the shameful yoke of England and join their brethern of the Republic. His appeals, made with all the glow and ardor of his earlier years, were widely read and influential, notwithstanding the fact that England had loaned so much money to the sore-pressed Republic through the agency of Walker himself.

Twenty years before Sumner had denounced the imperialism of the Polk administration, of which Walker was the mentor; in 1869 the famous New England abolitionist joined hands with Walker in this plan to force war upon Great Britain, friend and benefactor of both men, in order that the American flag might have sway over a peo-

ple who were already better governed than those of the United States. Truly, politics makes strange bedfellows, and never did stranger companions lie down together than Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Robert J. Walker of Mississippi.

Half a year later, November 11, 1869, at the age of 68, when the country was becoming aroused over the scandal of the "Alaskan deal," the "Wizard of Mississippi," worn out with the toils of an eventful career, answered the last call. He was buried in Oak Hill cemetery, where, as I have already said, his remains rested in an unmarked grave for nearly forty years, and where his simple marble slab gives only the name of the man whose remains lie beneath it, but not an inkling of the importance of the career thus commemorated. And when I visited the cemetery some time ago the keepers and attendants insisted that no Robert Walker had ever been buried in those grounds!

Thus runs the story of our greatest imperialist, of one of the Nation's saviors in time of danger. It emphasizes to me, at least, the old saying that history is stranger than fiction.

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